

Major cuts in schools possible

By **John Hilliard**/ Staff Writer
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School officials are warning district-wide layoffs, a sidelined athletic program or even a closed school building may be needed to keep the school system afloat next year.

In a meeting room packed with parents in chairs, standing in doorways and seated on the floor, Superintendent Gary Burton unveiled a pair of plans he believed would "dismantle" the town's school system in order to meet budget guidelines for fiscal year 2007.

"It's kind of like death by poison or death by firing squad," Burton told the crowd.

Either of Burton's two proposals would cut about \$2.5 million - or 8 percent - from the school department budget to meet the Finance Committee's guideline of \$26 million for FY07.

The town expects a \$3.3 million shortfall in the FY07 budget, with the FinCom setting budget guidelines that cut department budgets by 8 percent.

The guideline factors in a roughly \$1.4 million budget increase for salaries, utilities and transportation, then requires subtracting 8 percent.

Among the "budget busters" next year are climbing health care and pension costs, finance officials have said, as well as rising costs of utilities and school transportation.

Meanwhile, the School Committee said a budget of about \$28.7 million is needed to maintain existing school programs and services. The current school budget is \$27.8 million and includes about \$500,000 in budget offsets.

Burton said administrators worked a combined 200 hours to develop the two cost-cutting options and could find no way to save money without drastic service cuts.

"You can't nibble at the edges and make up the 8 percent that has to be removed," he said.

The School Committee will decide on Nov. 21 which option to present to the Finance Committee later this month.

"I personally and professionally hope you reject both these plans," said Burton.

In a column to the Town Crier this week, the School Committee said it will advocate for a Proposition 2-1/2 override next year.

Under the so-called "preservation of class size/core programs" option, the Happy Hollow elementary school would close its doors next year, the athletic program funding would be halved, and all extracurricular activities would be eliminated.

The "preservation of neighborhood schools" option would keep Happy Hollow open, but eliminate the entire athletic program and see class sizes increase in grades 6 through 12.

In both options, more than 25 full-time positions would be lost, including all five librarians, the kindergarten through grade 5 math/science curriculum coordinator and the elementary reading coordinator.

Because of state and federal regulations, funding for special education was not affected, said Burton.

Committee member Louis Jurist said the proposals are not "exercises."

"This is not something to scare or frighten people unnecessarily," said Jurist. "These are the facts. They are not made up."

Unhappy parents

Burton's two proposals were met largely by frowning faces in the crowd. Many parents worried school cuts would carve into local property values.

When parents were asked whether they would consider moving out of town because of the cuts, about a dozen raised their hands.

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Kim Reichelt, whose parents moved to Wayland in 1967, said she could not believe the School Committee was considering the proposed cuts, and described herself as feeling "nauseous."

She was among those parents who would consider moving out of town if the committee enacted the budget reductions.

Eric Markanian said he moved to town for the school system.

"What you're proposing here, I believe, is horrible," he said, adding the committee would be "destroying a town" with these cuts.

Resident Ken Isaacson questioned whether proposed layoffs should include district administrators instead of teachers.

Burton replied that five central administrators are employed by the town, plus five building principals and two assistant principals. Two other administrator jobs are not funded by the town, including a job overseeing the local Metco program.

"This is not, by any measure, a top-heavy district," said Burton.

School Committee Chairman Jeff Dieffenbach said the board needs a budget plan that meets FinCom guidelines, but the board will also develop a budget which maintains existing school programs and services.

"We're going to submit (a proposed reduced) budget to the Finance Committee," said Dieffenbach, who added, "I don't see any way the School Committee will come close to recommending something like this."

Selectmen Chairman Michael Tichnor said his board has not discussed whether there would be an override for FY07.

He said the FinCom has to review department budgets with an 8 percent cut while the Ad Hoc Budget Advisory Committee develops cost saving measures.

Tichnor said he believes the \$3.3 million shortfall can be partially reduced, but there will a "net" shortfall in FY07. The Ad Hoc committee should complete its work before the end of the year.

"The (budget) process has to take its course," said Tichnor. "It would not be appropriate to shortcut the process."

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